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ABSTRACT

This book provides educators and education policy makers a picture of where the field of teaching adult English language learners is today in order to build a more effective delivery system for the future. It places adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) in the broader context of the U.S. education system (K-12 and adult education), then describes trends and issues in the areas of program design and instructional practice, assessment, teacher training and professional development, integration of research and practice, and technology. The book concludes that population trends and projections for the next 10 years suggest that the number of adult English language learners in the United States will continue to grow. The effective provision of services to these adults is a primary challenge to expanding and improving the U.S. adult education system. Adequate resources, as well as creative and alternative strategies, partnerships, and collaborative efforts, are needed to address the areas of assessment, teacher training and professional development, integration of research and practice, and technology. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education.) (Contains 58 references.) (SM)

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# ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Terrill

# Adult English Language Instruction in the 21st Century

# ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR
ESL LITERACY EDUCATION

NCLE CAL

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**Issues in Preparing Adult English Language Learners for Success Series**

***Preparing for Success: A Guide for Teaching Adult English Language Learners,*** by Brigitte Marshall

***Adult ESL Instruction in the 21st Century,*** by NCLE Staff

***Reading and Adult English Language Learners: A Review of the Research,*** by Miriam Burt, Joy Kreeft Peyton, and Rebecca Adams

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# Overview

Adult English language learners comprise a substantial segment of the population that enrolls in adult education programs in the United States. These learners want to improve their lives as individuals, community and family members, and workers. Many of them are settling into communities that previously have not had large populations of immigrants. To meet the increased demand for English language instruction, existing adult education programs are expanding, and new ones are being established. Qualified instructors and resources to support effective instruction are limited. Goal 5 of the strategic goals and objectives of the U.S. Department of Education (2002) mandates enhancing the quality of and access to postsecondary and adult education. At the same time, changes in federal policy requiring stricter accountability for reporting program outcomes are affecting the way that adult education programs operate. The impact of these factors is causing the field of adult education to evaluate where it is and where it should be going.

*Adult English Language Instruction in the 21st Century* provides an overview of the field of adult English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) instruction in the United States today. First, it places adult ESOL in the broader context of the U.S. education system, and then it describes trends and issues in the areas of program design and instructional practice, assessment, teacher training and professional development, integration of research and practice, and technology. The paper's intent is to give educators and education policymakers a clear view of where the field of teaching adult English language learners is today, so they can continue to build a more effective delivery system on the foundation of promising practices.

# Education in the United States

## Elementary, Secondary, and Post-Secondary Education

Schooling in the United States is anchored by the elementary and secondary, or pre-K–12 system, which spans pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and 12 academic years or grades. Education is provided through both public and private institutions, although public schools outnumber private schools and serve the majority of students. In general, school attendance is mandatory from the ages of 7 to 16. Curricula are set by the states. Local school districts and private institutions are empowered to make modifications within the broader state mandates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

The public school system in the United States is a public tax-supported, decentralized system that traces its origins to the 17th century. In 1647, Massachusetts enacted a law requiring towns of 50 or more households to provide a teacher for reading and writing. Larger towns were required to provide grammar schools to prepare youth for the university (Sticht, 2002). Townships established and directed their schools, defining program structure and instructional content based on the needs and priorities of the local population.

Today's public school system continues this tradition of decentralization. The federal government plays a leadership role to ensure equity of access and to promote quality of educational programming and delivery. State and local governments and education entities consisting of state and local boards of education, state education agencies, and local school districts are responsible for developing education policy and for direct administration. Funding is provided by federal, state, and local governments, with the federal government providing approximately 7% of the total funding; state governments providing 47%; and local governments providing 46%. In the 1999-2000 school year, more than 92,000 public schools served nearly 47 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

Approximately 26,000 private schools serve 5 million students. Private schools function independently in their administration, although they must adhere to minimum requirements of program quality established by the states in which they are located. Governing boards and professional staff direct the operations of individual schools. These schools rely primarily on tuition and private sector donations for funding (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service, 2002).

**In the 1999-2000 school year, more than 92,000 public schools served over 46.9 million students.**

Beyond the K–12 system, postsecondary education is available through more than 3,000 public and private colleges and universities across the country. Vocational education, which is also available at the secondary level, and adult education offer options for students who want to complete or augment their K–12 education credentials or who need English language or literacy instruction. (U.S. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service, 2002).

## Adult Education

The genesis of the present state-administered adult education system can be found in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" programs. Title IIB of the act established the Adult Basic Education Program. Two years later, the Adult Education Act (1966)

became Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Title III was the main federal program funding basic education and literacy programs for adults 16 years of age and older. The Adult Education Act was amended several times, broadening the scope of how states may use the money (e.g., not only for direct basic education services, but also for teacher training, demonstration projects for workplace literacy instruction, or instruction of special populations such as Native Americans and immigrants). Amendments also expanded the types of programs eligible to receive funds to include nonprofit, for-profit, and community-based organizations (Sticht, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1991).

Over time, additional federal funding streams supported adult education. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has provided funding under the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, and the U.S. Department of Labor has also contributed through the Comprehensive Education and Training Act (CETA) and the Job Partnership Training Act (JPTA; Gillespie, 1996). Over the years, these various pieces of legislation have reflected two often competing perspectives on the purposes of adult education: One is to provide all adults, regardless of educational attainment or social status, with broad, ongoing educational opportunities. The other is to provide those most in need with basic education and literacy skills that will improve their employment options and economic self-sufficiency (Grognet, 1997).

The National Literacy Act (NLA) of 1991 replaced the Adult Education Act (AEA) of 1966. The NLA was replaced in 1998 by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). WIA is a law aimed at improving the competitiveness of the United States in the global economy. It incorporates the NLA into Title II: the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA). Despite the emphasis of the WIA on workforce improvement, the AEFLA provides for all of the services funded under the NLA. Through the AEFLA legislation, funds are provided to state adult education agencies, which then make funding available to local programs through the state-administered grant system (Sticht, 2002). The largest percentage of these adult education programs (46%) are administered through local state education agencies.

Other delivery system types include community or technical colleges, community-based organizations, correctional institutions, or nonprofit organizations (Meeder, 2002). Each state has a designated official, a state director of adult education, responsible for implementing the grant system in the state and for making yearly statistical reports to the federal government on the learners and programs they fund. AEFLA also establishes accountability requirements for determining the effectiveness of programs funded under the act. The measures and methods for meeting these requirements are established by the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS), a project of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education (2001a).

In fiscal year 2002, $494.8 million in federal funds were allocated to states through the U.S. Department of Education for adult education programming. An additional $70 million was committed for English literacy and civics programming (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2002a, see "Program Design and Instructional Practice" in chapter 3 for a description of this program). These federal resources are supplemented by funds from state and local education agencies. The most recent data available show that an average of $374 (both from federal and state matching funds) was spent per adult student in 1998 (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2001b). This is still considerably less than the $6,835 average spent per student in the elementary and secondary education system (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Although overall funding has increased in recent years, the proportion of federal funding to state and local funding for adult education has decreased steadily. In 1966, the federal government paid $53 per enrollee and local and state funds paid $26. In 1998, the federal government paid $89 per enrollee, while state and local funding supplied $240 (Sticht, 2002). In program year 2000, the leading recipients of state-administered federal funding were local education agencies (46%), public and private nonprofit organizations (13%), correctional institutions (11%), community and technical colleges (10%), and community-based organizations (10%; Meeder, 2002).

**In fiscal year 2002, $494.8 million in federal funds were allocated to states through the U.S. Department of Education for adult education programming.**

Adult education services are also provided by other organizations that may or may not receive federal funding. These include faith-based organizations, volunteer-based organizations, museums, and libraries.

In 2000, the National Literacy Summit, a joint effort among the U.S. Department of Education, the National Institute for Literacy, and other public and private organizations concerned about adult literacy issues inaugurated a series of meetings throughout the United States to develop an action agenda that would create a strong adult education system. The resulting document, From the Margins to the Mainstream: An Action Agenda for Literacy (National Institute for Literacy, 2000), sets forth the issues and challenges—resources, access, and quality—facing the adult education system in the United States today. Meeting the needs of English language learners was identified in this document as an area requiring special attention. As a result, a companion action agenda was developed that focuses specifically on the unique characteristics and needs of this population (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages [TESOL], 2003).

## Adult ESOL

The federal statute that established adult basic education programs (the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964) authorized instruction "toward the elimination of the inability of all adults to read and write English," thus establishing services for English language learners within the federally funded adult education system. Subsequent legislation continued to support language instruction for immigrants and refugees. Sometimes discretionary monies are set aside for services to specific populations (e.g., Cuban, Haitian, and Southeast Asian refugees). At other times, monies are earmarked for the development and teaching of specific content (e.g., citizenship and civics) (Terrill, 2000b; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1991). Adult ESOL classes are offered through the adult education system.

As the number of English language learners has grown, many states and territories have appointed an ESOL specialist to work closely with the state director of

adult education to oversee services to the ESOL population. According to the most recent statistics for program year 2000–2001, 42% of all the participants (i.e., 1.1 million out of a total of 2.7 million) enrolled in state-administered adult education programs were enrolled in ESOL classes (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2002c). This percentage does not include English language learners who are being served within other segments of the system, such as adult basic education (ABE) or adult secondary education (ASE) classes. Of the learners enrolled in all state-administered adult education programs, including adult ESOL, in 2001, approximately 39% were Hispanic/Latino, 31% were White (this figure includes U.S. natives and non-natives who identify themselves in this category), 21% were Black/African American, 7% were Asian, 2% were American Indian or native Alaskan, and 1% were native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Adult ESOL services are also provided through the same private organizations that deliver general adult education services (described above), as well as through private language schools and academic institutions. Significant numbers of adult English language learners are served in programs sponsored by community-based organizations and large national volunteer literacy organizations such as Laubach Literacy and Literacy Volunteers of America (the organizations merged October 2002 to form ProLiteracy). Laubach Literacy reported that in 1999-2000, approximately 77% of their member programs provided ESL instruction to 68,000 adult English language learners (Laubach Literacy, 2001). Only 23% of the programs provided literacy instruction to native English speakers only. This figure gives some indication of the magnitude of services provided by this sector.

**According to the most recent statistics for program year 2000–2001, 42% of all the participants (i.e., 1.1 million out of a total of 2.7 million) enrolled in state-administered adult education programs were enrolled in ESOL classes.**

# Adult English Language Learners

Learner populations served in adult ESOL classes are diverse. Native language, socioeconomic status, age, educational background, cultural practices, ethnicity, goals, immigration status, length of time in the United States, and personal experiences are examples of differences among learners. It is not unusual to find refugees, undocumented and documented immigrants, farmers, former foreign government personnel, the elderly, single women, married men with dependent families, people learning to read for the first time, and university bound students all in the same adult ESOL classroom.

Of the English language learners enrolled in state-administered adult education programs in program year 2000-2001, 55% (or 6.1 million participants) were enrolled in beginning literacy or beginning ESOL classes (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2002b). Participants in adult ESOL classes give a number of reasons for enrolling: to improve general English language competence; to address personal, family, or social needs; to meet work demands or pursue better employment; or to further their education (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995; Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998). Learners in these classes generally demonstrate high levels of enthusiasm for learning English and stay in programs longer than do learners in other adult basic education classes (e.g., GED preparation or basic reading and writing). Results from a national study

completed in 1994 found that ESOL learners acquired three to four times more instruction than ABE and ASE students: The ESOL students acquired a median of 113 hours, ABE acquired 35, and ASE acquired 28 (Fitzgerald, 1995, p. 1). Adult English language learners possess life experience, maturity, and motivation, which facilitate their learning. Many have positive memories of school and are eager to continue their education (Fitzgerald, 1995; Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998). However, they do describe barriers to participation, including availability of time, money, childcare, and transportation, as well as a lack of awareness of appropriate programs available in their geographic areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995).

Although data focusing specifically on learners enrolled in adult ESOL classes are limited, data on the *potential* population of interest for adult ESOL classes can offer additional descriptive details. In 2000, the foreign-born population in the United States was 28.4 million (10.4% of the total population). Hispanics accounted for 51% of the foreign-born population; Asian/Pacific Islanders were second at 25%; Europeans represented 15%; and the remaining 9% represented other world areas. Most of the foreign-born population was either in the age group 25–54 (58.7%) or 55+ (20.2%). Education levels varied, but 67% of this population had a high school education or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001b).

In supplemental reports, 35,176,332 people 18 years or older reported speaking a language other than English at home. While this does not necessarily indicate need for English language instruction, at least 9 million in this group reported that they do not speak English well or do not speak English at all (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001a). In terms of literacy levels, 64% of the second-language, foreign-born population in the United States, ages 16-65, are at Level 1 of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), meaning they have difficulty reading and using even simple, clearly formatted print information in English, such as directions on a prescription bottle (Tuijnman, 2000).

# Trends and Issues in Adult ESOL in the United States

The adult ESOL field, like adult education in general, is facing a number of challenges and changes. Immigration is increasing, and demographic and settlement patterns are shifting. States that previously had not had large numbers of immigrants, such as Arkansas, Nebraska, and Tennessee, are experiencing huge growth in immigrant populations. Meeting this challenge can be especially difficult for those states that have not yet developed an adult ESOL delivery infrastructure. Even in those states that do have experience with adult ESOL instruction, the need to respond to rising demand often results in classes that are too large to be effective (Florez & Burt, 2001; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; Van Duzer, 2002; Wrigley, Chisman, & Ewen, 1993; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). There is also a trend toward more youth enrolling in adult education programs, including adult ESOL classes, which adds a new element of diversity and new concerns regarding instructional content, delivery, and even classroom management (Hayes, 2000).

The demand for ESOL classes, for qualified personnel to work with adult English language learners, and for appropriate resources to support these efforts has increased greatly. Changes in federal policy call for increased accountability requirements for all projects receiving federal dollars. Although knowledge of second language acquisition (SLA) and language teaching continues to evolve, research on the specific populations served in traditional adult ESOL programs

is still limited. There is a focus in policy and instruction to prepare individuals for the complexities of modern life, particularly in the workplace, and the skills required to succeed.

Current trends and issues that have emerged from this context are in the areas of

- program design and instructional practice,
- assessment,
- teacher training and professional development,
- integration of research and practice, and
- technology.

These trends and issues cut across adult ESOL programs, regardless of their funding sources or structures. In the following section, each trend or issue is described, first by outlining its scope, second by discussing its promising practices, and third by explaining its remaining challenges. This information has been compiled from literature reviews of documents, which are cited in References and Additional Resources at the end of this paper.

## Program Design and Instructional Practice

The diversity of populations served, program settings, systems of delivery, and instructional philosophies embraced results in a wide range of program designs and instructional practices in adult ESOL education in the United States. In general, the hallmark of adult ESOL programs is flexibility. To be effective, programs need to offer classes that vary in terms of scheduling, location, duration, and content in order to maximize learning opportunities while accommodating the realities and constraints of adult learners' lives.

Instruction can be provided by one-to-one tutoring or in small or large groups. Given the increasing demand for adult ESOL instruction, large classes or classes of learners with widely varied English language proficiency levels (multilevel classes) are not uncommon (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; TESOL, 2003). Adult ESOL programming seldom involves only language and

literacy instruction. It also often provides English language learners with access to information, practices, and concepts that they need to survive and succeed in a variety of life roles, including as life-long learners, in their new land.

The most common types of adult ESOL instruction offered include the following:

***Lifeskills or general ESOL classes*** focus on development of general English language skills. They usually address language skills development in the context of topics or functions of daily life, such as going to the doctor, getting a job, shopping, or managing money.

***Family ESOL literacy programs*** address the family as a whole, providing English language and literacy instruction for adults and children. Often they include parenting elements and information that parents can use to further their children's literacy and general educational development. Some programs, such as Even Start, are collaborations between K–12 and adult education programs.

***English Literacy/Civics (EL/Civics) programs*** integrate English language instruction with opportunities to learn about civil rights, civic participation and responsibility, and citizenship. While instruction of this type has been offered in some programs for some time, there has been new interest in developing EL/civics classes since a specific EL/civics initiative was enacted by the U.S. Department of Education in fiscal year 2000.

***Vocational ESL (VESL) programs*** prepare learners for jobs. They may concentrate on general pre-employment skills such as how to find a job or preparing for an interview, or they may target preparation for jobs in specific fields such as horticulture or hospitality. These courses are usually offered in high schools or in vocational and technical schools. Participants may or may not be employed.

***Workplace ESOL classes*** are offered in work settings to incumbent workers and target language development that is directly relevant to that setting (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; Taylor, 1997; TESOL, 2003; Weinstein, 1998; Weinstein-Shr & Quintero, 1995; Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

## Promising Practices

Frequently used instructional strategies for adult English language learners

- incorporate principles of adult learning, adult second language acquisition, and working with multicultural groups;
- employ a number of different approaches and techniques (e.g., competency-based, whole language, participatory, grammar-based, and skills-based approaches such as phonics), often in combination, that can provide successful learning opportunities to adults with different learning styles and preferences, diverse needs, various motivations and goals, and possible learning disabilities;
- begin with assessment of learners' needs and goals;
- acknowledge and draw upon learners' prior experiences and strengths;
- incorporate content that is relevant and immediately usable to learners in their roles as parents, citizens, workers, and life-long learners;
- involve learners and learner input in planning;
- include ongoing opportunities for assessment and evaluation; and
- provide courses of varied intensity and duration with flexible schedules to meet diverse learner needs (Florez & Burt, 2001; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; TESOL, 2000; Van Duzer, 2002; Wrigley, Chisman, & Ewen, 1993; Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Although curriculum and instructional design vary from program to program, efforts to develop standards and indicators for learner performance and program quality are underway. These efforts include program standards and a program self-review instrument from Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (2003); Equipped for the Future content standards (Stein, 2001); and state projects such as the California model ESOL standards (California Department of Education, 1992), the Massachusetts adult ESOL frameworks (Department of Education, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1999), and the *Tennessee Adult ESOL Curriculum Resource Book* (Sawyer, 2001). All of these efforts should produce program and instructional models and quality standards that are accepted and easily accessed by professionals in the field.

## CHALLENGES

The field of adult ESOL in the United States faces significant challenges in the area of program design and instructional practice. Insufficient or uneven funding is perhaps the largest of them. Insufficient funding generates other challenges: providing services and facilities to meet demands; offering teacher pay and benefits that attract and retain a professional workforce; developing and delivering relevant, ongoing training to teachers and administrators; expanding the currently limited research base on adult ESOL instruction; and assisting programs in developing curricula and assessment plans to support instructional quality.

Creating curricula that incorporate and address learner needs is also an issue. With so many different needs to serve, some programs choose generalized curricula and materials in order to serve the broadest possible learner population. However, teachers may not be trained to incorporate specific learner needs within a generalized curriculum. Juggling the needs of learners in multilevel classes may increase the burden on teachers. Programs may also establish classes in response to specific funding opportunities or external standards rather than in response to expressed learner needs.

The diversity of learners, program settings, purposes, and resources in adult ESOL places a unique burden on the field. The field is highly decentralized by nature. States and individual non-federally funded programs make programming decisions independently. This makes the creation of an effective common infrastructure to support program work more difficult.

There is a wide range of quality in adult ESOL programming. The reasons for this include the following:

- immigration and settlement trends that bring English language learners to areas of the country in which program and instructional staff are unaccustomed to and untrained for working with English language learners;
- uneven and insufficient funding;
- the overwhelming need for English language instruction; and
- the sheer diversity of learners and their needs, including increasing numbers of 16- to 18-year-olds registering for adult ESOL classes (Florez & Burt, 2001; Hayes, 2000; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; Van Duzer, 2002; Wrigley, Chisman, & Ewen, 1993; Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

## Assessment

Given recent federal and state emphasis on establishment of standards and demonstration of accountability, assessment continues to be a priority in adult ESOL education. Over the years, many adult ESOL programs have used a variety of assessment tools to place learners in classes, inform instruction, evaluate learner progress, and report achievements. These assessment tools include

- standardized tests,
- materials-based and teacher-made tests,
- portfolios,
- projects, and
- demonstrations.

Which assessments are used depends on a program's philosophy of language and learning, the needs of the learners, and the demands of the program administration and funding agencies. Under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, assessment of each learner using a standardized assessment procedure is mandatory, but states have the flexibility to choose their own assessment procedures. Reporting guidelines have been established under the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS). The NRS requires each state to report learners' educational gains in terms of level descriptors defined by the NRS implementation guidelines (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2001a).

This requirement for standardized assessment data has intensified the debate among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers as to what constitutes success and how to measure it. Because pre- and post-test data are required, most states have chosen a standardized test. Several states allow programs to choose among a list of approved tests. A few states allow a standardized test for initial level determination and then a competency checklist or uniform portfolio for level exit (Van Duzer, 2002).


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### Promising Practices

To implement effective assessment practice, programs

- carry out effective assessment within the context of a comprehensive program evaluation plan. Program staff, learners, and external stakeholders work together to set goals and objectives for the program, develop measures to assess progress toward these goals and objectives, and identify how achievement will be determined (Holt & Van Duzer, 2000). A comprehensive plan allows learners to know how they are progressing, teachers to assess the effectiveness of instruction, administrators to monitor progress towards program goals and to gain feedback for program improvement, and external stakeholders to see the results of their investment.
- identify the purpose of the assessment: why the learners are being assessed and what learning is to be assessed (e.g., increased speaking proficiency or creating a resume).
- select assessment instruments and procedures that match the program's learning goals (e.g., an oral interview to show progress in speaking skills or completed resume to demonstrate ability to create a resume) and that engage learners so they are interested and will strive to do their best.
- use multiple measures to present a more complete picture of what has been learned (e.g., standardized assessment, performance assessments, portfolios).
- ensure that adequate resources are available to carry out the assessments (e.g., enough materials, comfortable environment, adequately trained administrators and scorers).
- know the limitations of the assessments selected.
- share assessment results with learners and instructors and with administrative staff and funders, and use the results as a basis for making decisions about program planning and instruction (National Research Council, 2002; Van Duzer & Berdan, 1999; Wrigley, 2001).

### Challenges

What learners, instructors, and program staff count as success may differ from what is measured by state-mandated assessment procedures. Completing goals, participating in class, taking initiative, exhibiting confidence, and increasing lan-

guage proficiency are each recognized as a valuable indicator of progress. However, under the NRS, success is identified as a gain in language proficiency level. NRS level descriptors for ESOL define English language proficiency for speaking/listening, reading/writing, and functional and workplace skills across six levels. Each state sets the percentage of learners that should progress from level to level. States have also designated specific assessment tools or processes that programs must use to show level gain. Yet issues remain concerning the time it takes to learn a language; the adequacy of current measures to assess language learning over time; the availability of resources (trained staff, proper testing conditions, testing materials); and the need for sound assessment policy at the local, state, and national levels.

The NRS has described six proficiency levels. Each state targets percentages of learners who must show level gain in a program year. However, predicting how long it will take to move from one NRS level to another is difficult. One of the problems is that the NRS is not an integrative scale: That is, it may take differing amounts of time to move from one level to another. For example, it will probably take longer to move from the ESL literacy level to beginning ESL than from low intermediate to high intermediate. There is no research to support how long it takes to move from one NRS level to another.

**Because adult learners are not in school six hours a day, five days a week (as children are), it is almost impossible to predict how long it would take to move from one level to another.**

Researchers studying children learning English as a second language suggest that it takes 5–7 years to learn a language well (Thomas & Collier, 1997). The Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) Project posited that it would take 500-1,000 hours of instruction for an adult who is literate in the native language but has not had prior English instruction to reach the level of being able to satisfy basic needs, survive on the job, and have limited interaction in English (*Competency-based*, 1985). Because adult learners are not in school six hours a day, five days a week (as children are), it is almost impossible to predict how long it would take to move from one level to another. The time it takes to show level gain on a proficiency scale depends on both program factors (e.g., intensity of classes and training and experience of instructors) and learner factors (e.g., educational background and age).

To demonstrate learner progress, commercially developed standardized tests are often used. They are easy to administer to groups and require minimal training for the test administrator. They also have documentation of reliability (consistency of results over time) and validity (measuring what the test says it measures; Holt & Van Duzer, 2000).

Despite their advantages, commercially developed standardized tests have limitations. They may not accurately reflect the curriculum being taught or capture the incremental changes in learning that occur over short periods of instructional time. This is especially a problem where learners may have only a few hours per week to devote to attending classes or where instruction is focused on a limited number of learner goals. Because it takes a long time to learn a language, learners may not have enough instructional time or broad enough instruction to demonstrate gain on a standardized test in the time frame states are requiring.

**The implementation of standardized assessment procedures requires extra staffing time and training.**

Although performance assessments (e.g., oral reports, projects, portfolios, and demonstrations) provide valuable information to learners, instructors, and other program staff, their use for accountability purposes is currently limited. To produce the reliable, hard data required for accountability, performance assessments would need to be standardized (National Research Council, 2002). That is, for each of the NRS functioning levels, tasks that represent level completion and guidelines and rubrics for evaluating performance on that level need to be developed and standardized, and evaluators need to be trained in using them.

The implementation of standardized assessment procedures requires extra staffing time and training. Resources beyond the limited operating funds of programs may need to be allocated. Administration and scoring procedures need to be followed carefully to ensure consistent and reliable assessment. This may require changes in program design to ensure that learners have adequate instructional time between pre- and post-testing.

At the national level, the WIA and the NRS have set criteria that states must meet in order to receive federal funding, but states set their own performance measures and assessment procedures for meeting the criteria. Certain states have instituted performance-based contracts by which programs receive money only

for the learners who make certain gains. Not all program staff may be aware of these policies and who sets them. These staff members may not understand the significance of the test gains. This lack of information, plus possible resentment at being required to use certain assessments, may cause the administrator to be less than careful when giving the test. This inadequate attention to detail could affect the assessment process and, hence, the results (National Research Council, 2002; Van Duzer, 2002; Van Duzer & Berdan, 1999; Wrigley, 2001).

## Teacher Training and Professional Development

The demand for qualified personnel to work with adult English language learners has greatly increased in recent years, as a result of ever-increasing demands for classes (Florez & Burt, 2001). While the demand for classes is not new, changing immigration patterns and have had an impact on professional development (Fitzgerald, 1995). As a result, new teachers are entering the field, experienced teachers are being asked to take on greater challenges, and adult basic education teachers are working with English language learners in classes along with native English speakers. Much of this is occurring in areas where the adult ESOL infrastructure is limited or nonexistent. Professional development is crucial for these teachers (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; TESOL, 2000).

### Promising Practices

Studies of professional development efforts in adult education reveal that promising practices exhibit the following characteristics:

- are ongoing, extensive, and based in solid theory and research;
- involve teachers in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the training efforts;
- provide teachers with opportunities and support to try new skills on the job and engage in feedback and follow-up activities;
- include time for inquiry, reflection, and collaboration; and
- provide adequate financial support for both full-time and part-time teachers to participate in professional development activities (Burt & Keenan, 1998; Crandall, 1994).

Given the realities of the field of adult ESOL education, creating professional development opportunities that meet these criteria is challenging. Recent professional development efforts that show promise include

- building teachers' knowledge in the areas of adult learning principles (in ESOL contexts), second language acquisition processes, effective second language teaching approaches, and techniques for working with multicultural groups;
- exploring ongoing professional development formats with opportunities for the application of new ideas, collaboration, and feedback (as well as integrating one-time workshops, workshop series, and conferences into these formats);
- using technology-based approaches (e.g., CD-ROMs, teleconferences, synchronous and asynchronous Internet-based courses, and television broadcasts) to offer professional development options that optimize financial resources, reach scattered teachers and programs, and promote collaboration and community;
- fostering reflective practice through individual or group models;
- promoting professional communities through efforts such as mentoring, practitioner research groups, reading circles, and peer teaching;
- encouraging teachers to bring theory, research, and practice together through practitioner research or joint projects between researchers and teachers;
- developing new models for credentialing and certification based on the skills and knowledge that adult ESOL teachers need to be able to demonstrate;
- focusing on professional development within other national efforts such as *Program Standards for Adult Education ESOL Programs* created by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (2000b) and *Research Agenda for Adult ESL* by the National Center for ESL Literacy Education with the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (1998; Burt & Keenan, 1998; Florez & Burt, 2001; Smith, Hofer, & Gillespie, 2000).

### Challenges

A large percentage of adult learners are English language learners. Yet adult ESOL programs, learners, and teachers are still somewhat marginal in adult education policy and structure. Many adult ESOL teachers feel that the field itself has a low status. Practitioners often work in cramped conditions with limited resources and materials. Most adult ESOL teachers are part-time, hourly employees with minimal or no employment benefits. They come to the field with varied backgrounds, training, and experiences. There is a high teacher turnover rate. A wide range of focuses in instructional contexts and content (e.g., workplace, academic, nonacademic, life skills, and volunteer programs) make uniform professional development challenging. Certification and training requirements for teachers vary from state to state and sometimes even from program to program within states. There are limited opportunities and funding for professional development. Many teachers who work on part-time schedules or in isolated programs have difficulty connecting with other teachers and participating in a professional community (Chisman, Wrigley, & Ewen, 1993; TESOL, 2003).

## Integration of Research and Practice

The reciprocal relationship between research and instructional practice is important in adult education. Research and its results are tools for establishing theories to guide practice, investigating what works for learners, and providing models to be tested and implemented. Practice serves as a real-world resource for research, a sounding board for both the design of research and the testing of results, and as a means for redirecting a research study or providing new information for further investigation.

Education research has tended to focus on the K–12 public school system, primarily the elementary grade levels. Research studies focusing on young English language learners have yielded important findings that have informed English language instruction for younger learners (Garcia, 2000). Funding for major research efforts in adult education, including adult ESOL, has not been as extensive to date. For example, since the 1970s, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) has funded 10

research centers for K–12 (the Regional Educational Laboratory Program). OERI funds only one research and development center for adult education, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). NCSALL has been in operation since 1996. Before this, OERI funded the National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL) at the University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School. NCAL was not established until 1990.

It is not surprising that the research base for adult English language learners is limited. This could change however: As the U.S. Department of Education incorporates the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 in educational efforts across all age levels, the call for practice grounded in scientifically based research and for accountability in research is now reaching adult education generally and adult ESOL education specifically (Meeder, 2002).

### Promising Practices

Until recently very little research was conducted with adult ESOL learners in adult ABE and ESOL contexts. Rather, decisions on what works relied on extrapolations from research with children or with adult learners studying English in university or other academic contexts. The field would benefit from research that focuses specifically on the populations and programs that constitute adult ESOL. Recent efforts to fund major research studies that either focus on adult ESOL or include adult ESOL populations and programs will expand the somewhat limited research base that exists now. These studies include the

- Reading Components Study (NCSALL, John Strucker, project director);
- Adult ESL Lab School (Portland State University and NCSALL, Steve Reder, project director);
- "What Works" Study of Adult ESL Literacy Students (American Institutes of Research, Larry Condelli, project director, and Heide Wrigley, subcontract manager); and
- Evaluation of Effective Adult Basic Education Programs and Practices (Abt Associates, Judith Alamprese, project director).

See Mortensen (2001) for information on these and other current research studies.

Promising practices emerging from these efforts demonstrate that

- Research that brings researchers and practitioners into closer collaborations has potential for exploiting the naturally reciprocal relationship between research and practice and addressing the gap that does exist between these two groups in adult education.
- Practitioner research, research that teachers carry out to address specific questions or issues in their classrooms, offers teachers the opportunity to target study for improving instructional practice if they receive adequate training and support.
- Opportunities for longitudinal studies that enable depth and breadth of observation are important in a field with the linguistic and cultural complexities inherent in adult ESOL.

## Challenges

The complexities of adult ESOL make research in this field challenging. Investigating issues of culture, language, and education is not easy when complicated by diverse, mobile learner populations and varied learning contexts. Long traditions of qualitative and ethnographic approaches to research in the field are at odds with the current emphasis on scientifically based research and interest in quantifiable outcomes. Finding or developing research designs that can acknowledge or accommodate these particular challenges of the field is an issue.

Furthermore, some of the challenges discussed in the section above on teacher training and professional development are challenges to the integration of research and practice as well. The paths of researchers and practitioners in adult ESOL have not traditionally crossed easily. Teachers working in part-time positions with low pay often do not have financial or scheduling support to participate in extra activities such as research. Also, they may have limited training and experience in research methods, making collaborations even more cumbersome. The need for translators and interpreters to gather valid data from participants with limited English skills adds to the overall cost of adult ESOL research. Finally, getting research information and findings to the field—connecting research to practice in useful and meaningful ways—is still not done efficiently and effectively.

## Technology

The use of technology in instruction is not new to the field of adult ESOL education. Adult ESOL professionals have long used applications such as audio and videotapes, cameras, overhead projectors, and software programs to enrich their instructional activities. More recently instructors are integrating multimedia packages and PowerPoint presentations into instruction. Educators continue to explore and develop new uses of technology. They are using it as an instructional tool in the classroom, as a delivery system for learner instruction, and as instructional content itself (e.g., learning word processing programs or building Web pages).

Technology can be used in a range of different contexts: in the classroom, at distance learning sites, and for extended or self-study. This adaptability is appealing in a field with a wide variety of program types, content objectives, instructional settings, and learner needs and goals. At the classroom or individual learning level, new technologies present opportunities to accomplish multiple instructional goals (e.g., integrated language skills, critical thinking, and cooperative and interpersonal skills). Technologies may also be responsive to different learning styles (e.g., auditory, visual, or tactile).

The use of technology for professional development is more recent. It is being explored for a variety of reasons, many similar to those prompting technology use in instruction: to increase delivery options; to address wide, often dispersed audiences; to establish ongoing professional development opportunities; to provide ways for practitioners to connect with each other; and to familiarize practitioners with technology so that they are prepared to incorporate it effectively in their own instructional practice. Emerging applications include development of self-access CD-ROMs, software programs, and Web-based courses and training programs that integrate face-to-face meetings with Internet-based or teleconferencing components.

### Promising Practices

Efforts to use technology applications effectively in adult ESOL instruction include

- addressing the need for sufficient funding to support technology integration, including the purchase of hardware, software, and accompanying materials, and providing adequate, ongoing technical support for maintenance;
- including technology objectives in long-term state-level adult education planning;
- choosing technology that supports and complements the approaches, needs, and goals of the instruction, as well as reflects what is known about language and literacy learning and use;
- developing new or expanding existing instructional delivery models that integrate technology applications, rather than using technology alone as a surrogate teacher;
- incorporating opportunities to develop proficiency in technology applications (e.g., word processing, Web-page development, or videotaping) in ESOL instruction;
- creating and using hybrid models that combine technology components with elements such as accompanying print materials, traditional classroom instruction, and face-to-face meetings;
- developing software programs and Web sites that are truly appropriate for and usable by immigrants learning English, especially at beginning levels;
- providing practitioners with training in instructional approaches and techniques that incorporate technology applications as well as in the functions and uses of the equipment (hardware) being used;
- researching and documenting the benefits and challenges of various uses of technology applications as instructional tools and as delivery mechanisms (e.g., video delivery of classes, video series with accompanying materials, hybrid models, and online courses); and
- using technology to expand or individualize learning inside and outside the classroom and to potentially reach learners who cannot come to class consistently (e.g., individualized activity stations, self-access learning labs, and online courses; Burt, 1999; Gaer, 1998; Hacker, 1999; Hawk, 2000; Terrill, 2000a).

## Challenges

While technology can benefit programs, instructors, and learners in adult ESOL (Fitzgerald, 1995), challenges still exist. Programs need financial resources to acquire technology and to support technology use, particularly as applications become more sophisticated, extensive, and expensive. Teachers need training and ongoing support to integrate technology consistently and effectively in instruction. Funding for adult ESOL instruction and teacher professional development is usually limited. On one hand, these financial constraints can make the use of technology beneficial, for example, by reaching dispersed learner populations or providing self-access teacher-training options. On the other hand, acquiring and supporting the hardware and software needed to integrate technology applications in instruction and professional development often exceeds the resources available.

Matching technology applications to the needs and goals of a program is another challenge. Factors such as financial limitations or fascination with a high-end technology application can lead to adoption of applications that are either more limited or more complicated than necessary to meet existing needs and goals. The value of incorporating basic applications such as word processing packages may be overlooked (Gaer, 1998; Terrill, 2000a).

Finally, the digital divide, the gap between who has access to technology (specifically, computers and the Internet) and who does not have access, must be considered. While computers and the Internet play a growing role in adult ESOL learners' and teachers' lives at work and home, there are still segments of both populations who could benefit from easier access to this type of technology and the information it conveys (Children's Partnership, 2000; Terrill, 2000a).

# Conclusion

Population trends and projections for the next 10 years indicate that the number of adult English language learners in the United States will continue to grow. The effective provision of services to adult English language learners is a primary challenge to expanding and improving the adult education system in this country (Comings, Reder, & Sum, 2001). Adequate resources, as well as creative and alternative strategies, partnerships, and collaborative efforts, are needed to address the areas of

- assessment,
- teacher training and professional development,
- integration of research and practice, and
- technology.

If this is accomplished, we will be able to help adult English language learners develop the language and skills they need to utilize their talents, experiences, and skills to build strong communities and participate effectively and successfully in their new land.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Program Design and Instructional Practice


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U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Supported Technology Initiatives:

BEST Plus Computer-Adaptive Revision of Basic English Skills Test (BEST). http://www.cal.org/BEST/compbest.htm

Cyberstep Instructional Materials

The Study Place: http://www.thestudyplace.org

English for All: http://www.mefa.org

TV411: http://www.TV411.org

PBS LiteracyLink: ESL/CivicsLink Online Staff Development Training: http://www.pbs.org/literacy/esl/esl.html/

PDK: Professional Development Kit: http://www.literacyonline.org/pdk.html

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# Adult English Language Instruction in the 21st Century

English language learners comprise a substantial segment of the population that enrolls in adult education programs in the United States. These learners want to improve their lives as individuals, community and family members, and workers.

This book was written to give educators and education policy makers a clear picture of where the field of teaching adult English language learners is today in order to build a more effective delivery system for the future. First, it places adult ESOL in the broader context of the U.S. education system, then it describes trends and issues in the areas of program design and instructional practice, assessment, teacher training and professional development, integration of research and practice, and technology.

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